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ABSTRACT

This paper is designed to help teachers use historical documents for teaching by employing the strategy developed by Hilda Taba. Evidence that can be used in history instruction includes both records and remains. Records are those items that were produced to insure that information could be preserved, such as hieroglyphics, manuscripts, and oral accounts in the form of sagas and ballads. Remains are physical evidence that were not intended to provide information, such as buildings or tools. With Taba's methods students use records and remains while learning to synthesize historical knowledge. Three steps in the process are: (1) identifying points and examining similar aspects of selected topics; (2) explaining, comparing and contrasting, and identifying cause and effect relationships; and (3) forming inferences, implications, or extrapolations. To apply this model to using historical documents, the process involves collecting documents, organizing them, presenting them, and dealing with questions that move from the specific document to the framework in which it was produced and finally to conclusions about the place of the document in the larger historical picture. (IS)

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USING DOCUMENTS IN HISTORY INSTRUCTION

An article prepared for preservice
and inservice social studies teachers
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One important way to maximize the study of history is through the use of historical documents. Newspapers, diaries, photographs, letters that are related to a particular historical period can make the understanding of history more personal and powerful. Further, using primary documents as springboards for critical thinking can not only make history more intriguing but such an approach also gives students an opportunity to practice and develop intellectual skills.

The purpose of this article is to suggest how, in an uncomplicated way, historical documents may be used to organize, develop, and present instruction.

A first step is defining what is meant by the term historical documents. Because the past can never be observed directly, historians must rely upon those observations, clues, or traces that are left behind. These become the raw materials for the historian to use. Generically, these materials are termed "sources." Source materials may be subdivided into the two categories, records and remains. Records denote some deliberate attempt to preserve or transmit information. Typically they include papyrus manuscripts, hieroglyphic accounts, inscribed clay bricks, biographies, memoirs, and oral records such as ballads or sagas. Remains consist of artifacts such as buildings, clothing, tools, weapons, cemeteries, anything which carries evidence of human activities even though it may not contain written inscriptions.

Historians utilize at least the processes of external criticism, internal criticism, and historical synthesis in studying historical records. Historians use the process of external criticism to ask "is this source what it purports to be?" For example, was a letter written by Thomas Jefferson or is it a skillful forgery? Through the process of internal criticism the historian seeks to determine the meaning and significance of the source. For example, what light

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does a newly discovered letter written by Thomas Jefferson throw on our understanding of his political philosophy? In sifting, analyzing, and weighing information internal criticism is the historian's necessary tool.

The most important function is historical synthesis. From the vast reservoir of verifiable data the historian must select, organize, relate and generalize. Not only are the questions "Who?" "What?" "Where?" "When" answered but intelligent responses are given to the crucial question "Why?".[1]

Probably most classroom instruction using historical records assumes external and internal criticism has been adequately performed. Usually the documents used in instruction are genuine and significant and instruction tends to focus on historical synthesis. An important question then is, "How may historical synthesis be taught?".

One way to teach synthesis is through memorization. To facilitate this objective one need only be certain that the synthesis is sound and that the supporting data is historically accurate.

The late Hilda Taba suggested a different strategy for learning. This strategy emphasizes the process of deriving a synthesis or generalization. If students are to learn to generalize, it is necessary for them to identify similarities and differences to suggest explanations and to infer generalizations from data. To do this effectively it is important that students follow a sequential procedure. The procedure or model developed by Taba consists of three steps.

1. Identifying points, examining similar aspects of selected topics.
2. Explaining items of identified information, comparing and contrasting, identifying cause and effect relationships.

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3. Forming inferences, implications, or extrapolations.[2]

Typically, instruction based on this model will follow a sequence of questions such as "What did you see?" "What did you notice?" "What do you think are the differences between _____and_____?" "Contrast/Compare _____and_____." "Why do you think these things happen?" "How can we pull this all together and summarize what we have been saying?"

The process of organizing instruction to utilize historical documents and the Taba sequence may be simply and conveniently done. Diagramed, the process is as follows:

Collection of Documents ——→ A variety of documents including accounts, biographies, poems and memoirs are collected from resources such as parallel readings books. All sources should relate to a specific topic or aspect of the topic.

Organization of Documents ——→ The documents are organized for sequence of use. Some editing may be done to delete sections. Some copies may be duplicated. The necessary tasks prior to actual presentation are completed.

Presentation of Documents ——→ Students read or hear documents.

Inquiry into documents

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Teacher directed questions that focus on:

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"What" Questions

1. Looking at data. This often involves looking at contrasting content samples with the same questions in mind. For example, "What are the author's basic assumptions about Black people? about white people?" "What are the author's assumptions about slavery?".

"Explanation" Questions

2. Explaining what is seen, such as, "Why do you think this document was written?" "How does this account compare with others we have read?".

"Generalization" Questions

3. Arriving at generalizations by inferring what the common features and differences are, for example: "What can you say or conclude about slavery from all of this?" "What can you say that is generally true about slavery after studying these documents?".

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Together historical documents and the Taba sequence when organized and developed as described in this article, offer an opportunity for history instruction to be done in such a manner that the student's opportunity to learn the nature of historical inquiry is maximized.

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Footnotes

1. Edgar B. Wesley and Stanley P. Wronski, Teaching Social Studies in High Schools. Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1964, p. 435.

2. Hilda Taba. Teacher's Handbook for Elementary Social Studies. Palo Alto, California: Addison Wesley Co., 1967, p. 59.

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